



News Update, 22 March 1989

Tibet - Uprising in Lhasa

A demonstration by 13 monks and nuns in Lhasa on Sunday 5th March turned into a three-day long incident and which commentators and witnesses have described as an uprising. A crowd of 600 Tibetans gathered round the demonstrators after police opened fire on them without warning or provocation in front of the Jokhang temple. In their highest admitted death-toll so far the Chinese police agreed that they shot dead ten demonstrators 'and onlookers' during the afternoon of 5th March.

In a wave of revenge demonstrations during the following night and the next two days up to a thousand Tibetans burnt down Chinese shops and threw stones at armed police. They called for the expulsion of the Chinese and the independence of Tibet, and for a time held complete control of the Tibetan quarter of Lhasa.

Many of the 200 Westerners in Lhasa at the time gave detailed accounts of police attempts to deal with the crowds by random shooting, mass arrests, and frequent beatings. The minimum independent figure for deaths is 60, and estimates of wounded and imprisoned run into the thousands.

The Military Take Over

After three days of demonstrations in the streets of Lhasa the Chinese premier Li Peng signed an act of the State Council in Beijing by which all control of the Tibetan capital was handed over to the army.

Within an area at least sixty kilometres from east to west no movement of people or vehicles has been allowed without special permits since midnight Tuesday 7th March. Up to 30,000 troops are reported to have taken over the city; the same number of armed police (Wu Jing in Chinese) are thought to be stationed in or around the capital. One witness said military checkpoints were placed every few metres in the city centre. All foreign travellers were ordered out of Tibet by the end of Thursday March 9th. The army, apart from one brief display of strength on March 8th, waited till the foreigners had left before replacing the police on the streets.

Tibetans contacted by phone since then have said only that the city was full of soldiers and that many people had been arrested. All have been described as too frightened to say more.

Chinese accounts of life under martial law

The Chinese press at first insisted that life had returned to normal, and that off-duty policemen could be heard snoring as they slept out in the open. They also asserted that people involved in the demonstrations had been flocking to police stations to turn themselves in. But on 18th March Hu Jintao, 1st Party Secretary of the Tibetan Region, admitted that there were still people openly defying martial law and called for extra vigilance.

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On 21st March laws were announced by which all Tibetans without residence permits who have failed to contribute to the economic and cultural life of the city were expelled from Lhasa.

Apart from these statements there has been no information at all from the city. This is the first time in the history of the modern Chinese state that martial law has been declared - though it was frequently implemented unofficially before the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976. But all previous responses by the Chinese authorities to even minor expressions of dissent have consisted of campaigns of mass arrest and multiple executions. There is no reason to think they will have behaved otherwise in Tibet this year. One article in The People's Daily called on the authorities to 'strike terror' into the hearts of the separatists.

Eyewitness Accounts

Foreign travellers who had been expelled by the Chinese on March 9th described the behaviour of the Chinese police in Lhasa as unnecessarily aggressive. 40 of them signed a petition sent to the Chinese leadership deploring the excesses of violence they had seen perpetrated by the police.

One American said that he had seen a group of about thirty demonstrators complete their second circuit of the Barkhor at midday on March 5th when he first heard police officers firing from a roof at the unarmed demonstrators. He added that no teargas was used until 12.24pm. - several minutes after the first shots were fired. There was a sustained burst of automatic firing at 12.30pm. The crowd only grew in size after these incidents. Police firing recommenced at about 2 or 3pm., leaving 10 dead by the official count.

One eyewitness interviewed in Hong Kong described seeing between thirty and forty bodies being loaded onto trucks parked near the Banakshol Hotel later that afternoon. Doctors the next day put the death figure at thirty.

Other eyewitnesses described watching police beat demonstrators in the street. One saw a child aged about ten beaten to what he considered to be a fatal degree; another reported seeing police fire at random through house windows, killing one girl while she was making tea. Accounts of violent arrests were frequent.

Several described a crowd of Tibetans chasing Chinese civilians and burning shops, but both Chinese and foreign sources described Tibetans as burning the contents of ransacked shops rather than stealing them.

Foreigners reported that the only Chinese known to have been killed was a photographer who fell into a glass window after being hit by a stone. The Chinese initially claimed that police fired in self-defence after a policeman was shot dead by a Tibetan. No evidence has been produced of either the dead policeman or the Tibetan marksman. All available eyewitnesses say that Tibetans were unarmed. Three others were quoted by Chinese sources as saying they saw Tibetans with guns but were not named or described.

End of the Honeymoon: The International Response

Within hours of the shooting on Sunday March 5th Western governments had started to issue statements of concern. In so doing they ended the 18 year holiday that China has enjoyed since the People's Republic was finally admitted to the UN in 1971. The issue of Tibet and the question of human rights abuses in China had not been raised in the UN since that date, prompting allegations against the non-communist nations of double standards, hypocrisy and plain cowardice.

On March 3rd, however, a few hours before the latest crisis began, the Dutch Government made a short but unequivocal call in the United Nations Commission of Human Rights for attention to be paid to the question of human rights in Tibet. This historical milestone was made more poignant by the fact that the Chinese Ambassador, following years of careful manoeuvring to consolidate China's respectability in the international community, had just taken for only the second time ever the Chair of the Commission.

Three days later Canadian Ambassadors Andreychuk called for the Chinese to clarify the situation regarding human rights in Tibet, and to allow access to observers. On the same day the US State department announced in Washington its deploring of the use of firearms against unarmed demonstrators. The British government, whilst expressing only concern at the loss of life and regret at the imposition of martial law, did make an unambiguous call for an early start to talks between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese Government. Other European nations expressed concern, but the French government broke ranks by calling on the Chinese to accept observers from the UN and other neutral organisations, as well as medical supplies, volunteers, and first aid equipment.

Beijing's response to its critics

The Chinese dealt with the central problem of Tibetan demands by bringing in the army. The secondary problem they face is how to respond to the sudden wave of criticism from western governments.

Their first strategy was of unparalleled ferocity and included calling in the EEC and Canadian Ambassadors in Beijing for protests. The EEC, which is preparing a collective position, may be chastened by the ardour of the Chinese counter-attack, which has already accused them of "wanton interference in China's internal affairs".

This strong use of language has produced for the Chinese the boon of explicit statements from the Americans, the EEC, and the Russians re-affirming China's sovereignty over Tibet, a matter the first two were careful to distinguish from their criticisms of human rights abuses. Russia gave unqualified support through the columns of Pravda to China's policies, but later hinted through sources in Geneva that this position was not final.

Lengthy articles appeared in the Chinese press expressing the outrage of the Chinese people at the meddling of foreign powers - not a purely rhetorical point, since this was China's original justification for invading Tibet. There were choice remarks about Northern Ireland, insisting that the British would be horrified if criticised on the subject. But China has less leverage now that its much vaunted marketplace is no longer proving attractive to foreign investors. The problems of bureaucracy, corruption, and political instability have eroded much of the commercial incentive that until last year dominated foreign relations with China, and the Hong Kong Financial Times reported in mid-March that even Japanese banks were worried about investing in China after the crackdown in Tibet.

The Prospect of Talks: Moving the Goalposts.

Chinese officials have been running a parallel campaign to discredit the Tibetans-in-Exile. This began, as usual, with accusations that Tibetans abroad had instigated the unrest. On this occasion officials claimed to have conclusive proof that Tibetans from abroad had smuggled in weapons. Beijing has not produced any evidence.

On March 22, however, Beijing stepped up its campaign by accusing not the Government-in-Exile but the Dalai Lama himself of sending in Tibetan terrorists specially trained in Japan with the intention of staging an incident on the 10th March, the anniversary of the 1959 Uprising in Tibet. Again, no evidence was produced. But the remarks showed an unprecedented level of

rancour on the part of the Chinese, either looking for an excuse to cancel the talks or trying to provoke the Tibetans into abandoning them.

In a more subtle move, the Chinese issued a series of statements which suggested that they had been willing to participate in talks for a long time, but that the Tibetans were attempting to obstruct them. In London an official announced that the Tibetans - who, unlike the Chinese, have documented their ceaseless flow of communications with the Chinese Embassy in Delhi - had never replied to the Chinese offer of talks. Communications with Delhi, he said, did not constitute 'a proper reply'. Then Beijing announced that it was already in direct contact with the Dalai Lama. The Tibetans refuted this, pointing out that if they meant indirect contacts they have had these since 1979. The Chinese remarks were not only fictitious but were re-statements of old positions designed to belittle or frustrate Tibetan attempts to get the Chinese to talk.

The Chinese accusations, which included repeated allegations that foreigners also entered Tibet to instigate riots, may appear to those who have monitored the Tibetan situation closely to be outrageous fabrications but do sometimes command some attention in the media, where not all journalists are informed in depth about the background to negotiations. This makes the work of pressure groups distributing accurate information of even greater urgency.

Demonstration in Shigatse

The Guardian's correspondent in Lhasa reported that an incident involving 300 Tibetans had taken place in Shigatse, in response to reports that the Chinese had poisoned the Panchen Lama, who died there in mysterious circumstances last January. The demonstrators, who burnt down a number of shops, are said to have accused the Chinese of ridiculing mourning ceremonies held after the death of the Panchen Lama. The report has not been independently confirmed but indicates that the unrest may not be confined to Lhasa as the Chinese have suggested.

Background News Updates – Summary, 26 March 1989

Lhasa - up to 40,000 expelled

Latest news from Lhasa according to the Chinese press is that all transients have been ordered to register with the police. If they do not contribute to the economic development of the region they have been told to leave. Those transients (presumably all those without residence permits) "who have nothing to do with the building of the region will be dealt with harshly", said the People's Daily.

Transients who are helping with economic, scientific and cultural development "will be dealt with leniently." T.A.R. Governor Doje Cering said the floating population of Lhasa had reached about 40,000 in a city with a permanent population of 100,000. [South China Morning Post 22 March 1989]

Ambassador admits Mass Settlement in Lhasa

Chinese Ambassador to the UK admitted on television last week that 40% of the population of Lhasa was non-Tibetan.

[ITV March 7th]

No More Filming in Tibet

20th March T.A.R. Government announced that in future all film and video shot in Tibet by foreigners would need prior authorisation from the authorities. [Lhasa radio in Chinese 20 Mar]

Language Concessions

16th March Beijing made another attempt to improve its record on language policy in Tibet by

announcing new rules that said by 1990 all official letters would be "primarily" in Tibetan and that by 1997 "most" lessons in secondary schools must be given in Tibetan. Tibetans have the right, it said, to use their own language in courts and in all dealings with the public security departments. No date was given for the implementation of this regulation.[Xinhua in Chinese 16 March]

Tibetan Terrorist Allegations

21 March United Front Director Yan Ming Fu made extraordinary allegations that the Dalai Lama had sent into Tibet Tibetans trained as terrorists in Japan, that Chinese foreknowledge of this had been the reason for the implementation of martial law on the 8th March, that Europeans had been sent into Tibet last year to organise riots, and that Beijing now had direct contacts with the Dalai Lama.

All those implicated by these remarks immediately denied them, including the Japanese police. The Tibetan Government in Exile challenged the Chinese to produce evidence of this and other allegations relating to the smuggling of weapons, and to allow an international commission of enquiry to assess them.[Xinhua and NCNA]

China celebrates 30 years Colonization in Xinjiang

A Beijing paper (Jiefangjun Bao) carried an account on 10th March of the work over the last 30 years of over a million retired PLA soldiers who had been settled in Xinjiang from 1954 onwards. Nearly a quarter of the region's product comes from the farms and factories run by these ex-soldiers, and 170 cities and 2,000 villages have been founded by them. All receive military training every year and have "built a border farm belt along belt along the border, some 1,500 km long, which has become a national defense protective screen where 'troops are stationed to open up wasteland and to garrison the frontiers' and which plays an important part in guaranteeing the security of the border areas.[Beijing Jiefangjun Bao 10 March]

General Zhang Admits to 21 Demonstrations in Tibet

The Military Commisar of the Tibet Region, General Zhang Suoshang, told delegates to the National People's Congress in Beijing on Friday 22 March that there had been 21 demonstrations or riots in Tibet since September 1987. He said that 600 people had been killed or wounded in these incidents, although it is unclear whether he was referring to police casualties only. The Chinese have earlier claimed that three hundred and fifty police were injured on October 1 1987 and another three hundred on March 5th 1988. These figures are not supported by eyewitness accounts.

On the same day Minister of Security Wang Fang told NPC delegates that there had been hundreds of demonstrations in China during 1988 as a result of price rises and official corruption. This unexpected admission was seen as an possible indication that China may be preparing to bring in sterner security measures to deal with unrest there.

Latest Reports put Death Figure at 800

A Western tourist who arrived back from Tibet on March 26th said that a handful of tourists had been allowed to stay in Shigatse until Lhasa police arrived last week to oversee their departure.

The tourist, who did not want to be named, said that Tibetans in Shigatse reported on March 23rd that some 800 people had been killed in Lhasa, and 1100 arrested. The higher figures cannot be independently confirmed but indicate the high level of distrust felt towards the Chinese authorities even in Shigatse, which the Chinese have at times tried to present as less nationalist than Lhasa.

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